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Reprogramming to Unplug During COVID-19: My Never Ending Story

Rachel S. Evans

University of Georgia School of Law, rsevans@uga.edu

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RACHEL EVANS

Read the new post!



Reprogramming to Unplug During COVID-19: My Never Ending Story

I've always been an "always on" kind of worker. Pre-pandemic, I regularly struggled with refraining from checking email when I first woke up in the morning, eating lunch from my desk, or making to-do lists for the following day from bed. And although I certainly can't complain about working with a cat in my lap, or spending less time commuting, I've been surprised to find myself loathing (more so) the very technology that has made it possible for me to work from home these last three months and counting.

Since our library's closure in early March, I find it harder than ever to unplug after 5:00 p.m., and easier than ever to work more than I should. Teleworking has made those boundaries I've always had trouble setting blurrier than ever. It's actually easier to keep my child out of a Zoom meeting than it is to keep myself from checking email late at night. In my quest to keep my over-working under control I'm trying to learn healthier habits, including being more mentally focused and reading more physical books.

One of the titles I've read during this time that I highly recommend to anyone else struggling with pandemic-specific tech fatigue is *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* by Jenny O'Dell. Don't let the title fool you; it is far from a self-help book as the "how to" might imply. Instead it is authored by an artist, the book reads like philosophy, and rather than suggesting you actually do nothing it calls for digital resistance (not abstinence) as a form of social activism amidst a world algorithmically monetizing our attention. From birdwatching to deep listening, and reflections from an unintentional digital detox following an intentional social distancing, O'Dell

carefully examines the past. Her solution: we start valuing our time in thought as much as (if not more than) our time "doing."

One of the other new things I'm trying is more mindfulness in general. I've practiced some form of meditation for about 15 years: in yoga classes or listening to ambient music. Recently a colleague recommended the Koru method, and several co-workers are taking the class along with me. I'm halfway through the course as I write this, and I'm already finding several of the techniques to be a resource in my daily life. Breathing in certain ways has prepared me better for virtual presentations sandwiched between online meetings, and body scans have even helped to calm my son in the middle of the night when we're both exhausted but he's fighting sleep. My only issue with the Koru method is the class revolving around an app and the course ebook.

In my pursuit to find more balance in an environment surrounded by technology, the impossibility of complete retreat is more obvious than ever. Using an app to track focusing on the moments I'm "present in" is, by design, distracting my focus from real life. I know establishing the routine of practice in this data-driven way is only temporary, but I must admit I cringe each time I log a meditation in the app.

In the meantime, I've consistently deleted more and more apps to limit my screen time and decrease phone pick-ups. I've purchased more books rather than settling for ebooks (even if "e" is free), and am reviving my love of pen and paper journaling. When I'm not listening to "nothing", which isn't necessarily silence, I'm returning to longtime favorites like Pauline Oliveros or Laraaji for my teleworking soundtracks. This reprogramming of myself to cherish the sights and sounds of a work-from-home experience continues to be a work-in-progress.

Rachel Evans Metadata Services and Special Collections Librarian at the University of Georgia Law Library.

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